

## Hope that We Can Change: Healing a Demon-Possessed Man

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And when Jesus had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains. *Mark 5:2-3*

We can hear this story today and be very grateful that possession by unclean spirits isn't a part of our lives. We may have had experience with people who have some type of mental illness that gives them similar characteristics to this demon-possessed man and know that they can be frightening to be around. But the Lord has not given us this story merely as a record of a long past event. The teachings for the New Church state quite clearly and often the following idea:

All miracles which the Lord Himself wrought when He was in the world signified the coming state of the church; thus that the eyes of the blind were opened and the ears of the deaf, that the tongues of the dumb were loosed, that the lame walked, and the maimed and also the lepers were healed signified that such men as are represented by the blind, deaf, dumb, lame, maimed, and leprous, would receive the Gospel and be spiritually healed and this through the coming of the Lord into the world. . . . Divine miracles have within them the end of building up the things of the church. (*Arcana Caelestia 7337*)

and in another place:

As diseases represented the hurtful and evil things of the spiritual life, therefore by the diseases which the Lord healed is signified liberation from various kinds of evil and falsity which infested the church and the human race, and which would have led to spiritual death. (*Arcana Caelestia 8364*)

So we know that this miracle represents an event that can take place in the life of each person who is becoming part of the church. But again imagine a person reading this miracle and thinking "What is its application to my life?" The person could reflect "The man possessed by demons wasn't really free like I am." But many of us can recall that the Lord has told us that freedom is a term that is relative to what we care about.

Hellish freedom is one thing, and heavenly freedom another. It is an exercise of hellish freedom to think and will evil, and so far as civil and moral laws do not hinder, to speak and do it. It is an exercise of heavenly freedom, on the other hand, to think and will good, and so far as opportunity is given, to speak and do it. Whatever we think, will, speak and do in freedom, we perceive as attributable to ourselves, for to everyone all freedom accords with that person's love. Consequently people caught up in a love of evil perceive no otherwise than that hellish freedom is real freedom, whereas people impelled by a love of good perceive that heavenly freedom is real freedom, so that each regards the opposite as enslavement. . . . Moreover, no one can deny that to be led by good is freedom, while to be led by evil is enslavement; for to be led by good is to be led by the Lord, whereas to be led by evil is to be led by the devil. (*Divine Providence 43*)

Again going back to the person who we are imagining reflecting on this miracle, that person might still be thinking, “Yes, I know I'm not completely free, but this demon-possessed man was really out of control. They couldn't even keep him out of trouble by chaining him up.”

In reality all people who have some genuine conscience and are battling a significant problem experience the apparent futility of chains and shackles. The chains and shackles can be rules, restrictions, or promises that we give ourselves to curb our strong inclination toward something that part of us likes but our conscience recognizes is a spiritual danger. This is very common in the life of an alcoholic. He will say to himself, “I'll be fine if I just drink beer” or “. . . if I don't start drinking in the morning” or “. . . as long as I haven't lost my job, I'm not really in trouble.” But these promises and rules don't stop him from hurting himself and others.

We can also try to control other reactions with rules or promises to ourselves. A woman who has recognized that she makes a mess out of many social situations by being so sensitive to how others see her that she makes a big deal out of minor comments by others or tiny mistakes she makes herself. She has seen how a warm and happy gathering can have a pall cast over it when she gets upset at something she thought was a criticism, but later recognized was not intended in the way she took it. She can tell herself, “I just have to be less sensitive in the future.” But over and over again she finds herself reacting in the same way again. Similar things can be said about anger, gossip, tendencies to dominate others or be dominated by them, impatience, spending habits that lead to financial problems and a host of other problems that keep us from being as useful and happy as we would like to be.

Not everyone has the experience of setting rules or making promises for themselves. A person with little or no conscience on a matter may freely indulge in a destructive behavior so long as he or she thinks there will be no consequence. And when there is a consequence, the person can think “In the future, I'll just have to be more careful not to get caught.” Such a person would not even think of praying to the Lord for help with the problem or would make no effort to recognize the evil motivations and false ideas that lead to this behavior.

When the Lord spoke to the presence within the man that had been referred to as an “unclean spirit” it turned out that it was in reality a legion or large group of evil spirits. Part of the reason that we cannot gain real control our own behavior by self-imposed rules is that the habits of our present life are supported by a complex set of motivations and beliefs. Any evil that has a significant effect on us, has its source in a community of evil spirits who in turn are connected to many, many other communities that work together to influence us toward that evil.

The evils that have a regular part of our lives have an enticement to them that feels good and comfortable to us. Part of the support that these evils get is a wide range of false ideas that justify or excuse them. In some ways they seem like a benefit or source of happiness and fulfillment to us. For example, a part of us can feel really fulfilled getting furiously angry at someone who has hurt, disappointed or frustrated us. The consequences after the initial blow-up might be terribly unpleasant, but in the moment that the angry words come out of our mouths it can feel so right. Evils present themselves as good and helpful. But their real intention is accurately portrayed by what happened when the legion of demons enter the huge herd of swine and caused their self-destruction by inspiring them to rush to a drowning death in the Sea of Galilee. The hells want us hurt. They want to destroy anything good and useful. They hate wise parental love. They hate friendships. They hate marriage. They hate a congregation that is trying to fulfill the role of a

church on earth. They want them destroyed and they will seek this destruction by any means that they can use. Anything that can get in the way of good and useful relationships can and will be used by them.

The New Church is blessed with a broad and powerful set of explanations of this reality and how evil spirits seek to influence our daily thoughts and actions. But as many of us have heard many times over, understanding the truth is not enough. We will not be healed by the Lord through learning alone. The Lord speaks of this in the following passage:

It would have been possible for the Lord to heal the understanding in each of us, and so cause us to think not evil but good, and this by means of fears of various kinds, by miracles, by conversations with the dead, and by visions and dreams. But to heal the understanding alone is to heal us outwardly only; for the understanding with its thought is the external of our life, while the will with its affection is the internal of our life. Therefore, the healing of the understanding alone would be like palliative healing, by which the interior malignity, shut in and prevented from coming out, would destroy first the near and then the remote parts till the whole would become mortified. It is the will itself that must be healed, not by means of an influx into it of the understanding for that is not possible, but by means of instruction and exhortation by the understanding. (*Divine Providence* 282)

If we seek true freedom from the evil spirits that get in the way of a more useful life and cause us harm just as they did to the demon-possessed man, we have to recognize the healing can come only when we approach the Lord and seek His help. It requires honest acknowledgement of the problem to ourselves and before the Lord in prayer. It requires us to ask for His help to bring about a change. Then we must act as if from ourselves in changing our behavior and thoughts.

The acquaintances of the man who had the demons cast out didn't know what to make of the change in him. It inspired fear in them. A person who is unaware of even the possibility of spiritual change can find it strange and even frightening. Spiritual change doesn't take place by simple human effort. To a person who wants intellectual control of all things, spiritual change and spiritual commitment is scary. A truly committed religious person can, without even trying to, leave a non-believer feeling very uncomfortable.

When the man had been healed he wanted to stay with the Lord. But the Lord did not allow him to do so. He said to the man, "God home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you." (Mark 5:19) We too can share our appreciation of the help we've received from the Lord. We can do this without being pushy fanatics. But not everyone will feel comfortable with our sense of the Lord's presence and help. For those who know nothing of it, we will be talking about a new reality. But just as many people came to the Lord during His life in the world because they had heard that he could provide healing, so too people who are frustrated with their present life and are longing for something better, longing for more than vague hope, can be encouraged to know that the Lord can be found even today. He can heal even today. He can bring blessings of greater happiness than any merely natural person can know to those who seek His help and follow His word.  
AMEN

Lessons: Mark 5:1-20, *Divine Providence* 145

## **Mark 5:1-20**

<sup>1</sup> Then [Jesus and the disciples] came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. <sup>2</sup> And when Jesus had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>3</sup> who had *his* dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, <sup>4</sup> because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. <sup>5</sup> And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. <sup>6</sup> When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. <sup>7</sup> And he cried out with a loud voice and said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me." <sup>8</sup> For He said to him, "Come out of the man, unclean spirit!" <sup>9</sup> Then He asked him, "What *is* your name?" And he answered, saying, "My name *is* Legion; for we are many." <sup>10</sup> Also he begged Him earnestly that He would not send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup> Now a large herd of swine was feeding there near the mountains. <sup>12</sup> So all the demons begged Him, saying, "Send us to the swine, that we may enter them." <sup>13</sup> And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea. <sup>14</sup> So those who fed the swine fled, and they told *it* in the city and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that had happened. <sup>15</sup> Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one *who had been* demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

## ***Divine Providence 145:2-3***

Because the internal and external levels of the mind are so distinct, it is possible also for the internal level to battle with the external and by battling force it to consent.

A battle ensues when we think that evils are sins and therefore resolves to desist from them; for when we desist, a door is opened, and after it is opened the Lord casts out the lusts for evil which occupied the internal level of thought and in their stead implants affections for good. This He does in the internal level of thought. But because the delights of the lusts for evil, which occupy the external level of thought, cannot be cast out at the same time, a battle therefore ensues between the internal and external levels of thought. The internal level wishes to cast out those delights because they are delights in evil and are incompatible with the affections for good that the internal level possesses now, and in place of the delights in evil it wishes to introduce delights in good that are compatible. Delights in good are what we call goods of charity. From this discordance a battle commences, which, if it becomes severe, is called a temptation or trial.

Now because we are human owing to the internal level of our thought - for this is our very spirit - it follows that we compel ourselves when we compels the external level of our thought to consent to or to admit the delights of its affections, which are goods of charity.

It is apparent that this is not contrary to rationality and freedom, but in accord with them, for it is rationality that initiates the battle and freedom that prosecutes it. Freedom itself also resides with rationality in the internal self, and from that in the external self.